



SciVerse ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 30 (2011) 2324 – 2329

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCPCG-2011

The Effects of Attachment Styles, Problem-Solving Skills, and Communication Skills on Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of being secure or insecure, being an effective or ineffective problem solver, and having effective or ineffective communication skills on different dimensions of relationship satisfaction. The participants of the present study were 142 undergraduate and graduate students with a mean of 21.8 years. Multivariate Analysis of Variance results revealed a significant Attachment Style main effect on dyadic cohesion and dyadic satisfaction, and a significant interaction effect for Effectiveness of Problem Solving Skills x Level of Conflict Tendency. The results were discussed in the light of the existing literature.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the 2nd World Conference on Psychology, Counselling and Guidance.

Keywords: Attachment Styles; problem-solving skills; communication skills; relationship satisfaction

1. Introduction

Problems in romantic relationships constitute a significant source in seeking professional help among university students (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). Such problems are considered as having a great potential of leading stress responses, self-esteem problems, and academic difficulties (Conolly & Konarski, 1994; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Therefore, understanding late adolescents' interpersonal relationship dynamics would help clinicians to be more effective in helping individuals to improve their relationship satisfactions. In doing so, being well-grounded in several domains, namely adult attachment, conflict, problem-solving skills and communication skills seems to be important due to their close relation to each other (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001) and also to relationship satisfaction (Corcoran & Mallickrodt, 2000; Feeney, 1999).

Adult Attachment

Attachment representations are of particular importance in romantic relationships, due to their role in shaping individuals' behaviors with their partners (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Theoretically, individuals differ on their attachment security levels, which in turn, affect the strategies they prefer in managing attachment-related affect (Bowlby, 1988). Although secure or insecure strategies were originally measured categorically, in recent years researchers have begun to assess adult attachment on a dimensional basis (Creasey & Ladd, 2004). Based on Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) study, two reliable dimensions emerged from factor analysis, namely attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. The interaction of these two dimensions determines the person's

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attachment strategies and security level. Accordingly, attachment security represents being able to approach partner for affection and keeping him/her close for times of need (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004). On the other hand, attachment insecurity has been identified as having either higher levels of attachment avoidance and/or attachment anxiety (Brennan et al., 1998). More specifically, high attachment avoidance refers to establishment of an emotional distance from the partner and relying on self; whereas high attachment anxiety represents being overly sensitive to any cues implying separation and thus, being overly dependent to the partner (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004). Theoretically, these attachment systems get activated during stressful life events (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), such as conflicts, and prototypical behaviors and emotional features of different attachment systems evolve during conflict situations (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). In other words, how an individual would emotionally or behaviorally react to the conflictual situation would depend on the individual's attachment style (Pietromonaco, Greenwood, & Feldman Barret, 2004). In this sense, having an insecure attachment style lead these individuals to view their romantic relationship experiences in a negative manner (Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010) and consequently, they tend to engage in destructive behaviors during problem situations (Simpson et al., 1996).

Problem Solving Skills and Communication Skills

Apart from attachment styles, appraisals one's own problem-solving skills considered as an important factor that effects how a conflict situation would be handled (Heppner & Lee, 2002). Accordingly, self-confident problem-solvers could be expected to engage in a conflict with a calm attitude and would not be dreaded by difficulties, whereas problem solvers with a lower level of self-confidence would display an anxious attitude, which might result with disruption by the difficulties (Maddux, 2002). Therefore, it appears that appraisals of one's own skills would shape their responds to conflicts, and in turn, such responses would determine the efficiency of conflict resolution attempts. Moreover, communication skills are of particular importance in relationship satisfaction, since ineffective communication strategies would exacerbate conflictual situations (Noller & Feeney, 1998). In fact, based on the communication process model proposed by Harary and Battel (1981) even the content of the communication itself has the potential to activate new conflicts, since the message undergoes some alterations during the information transferred from one individual to the other. Such alterations decrease the possibility to solve problems, which results in decline of relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Gottman, 1994; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). In fact, a prior study revealed that having lower levels of communication skills was one of the critical factors associated with relationship satisfaction (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006).

Based on the regarding literature, attachment styles, problem solving skills and communication skills seems to have important effects on relationship satisfaction. However, it also appears that all these factors are interrelated and their effects would differ accordingly. Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of having secure or insecure attachment style, being an effective or ineffective problem solver, and having effective or ineffective communication skills on relationship satisfaction.

2. Method

Participants. The participants of the present study were 142 undergraduate and graduate students from different departments of Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Since this study is a part of a larger project, same sample was used in other studies (e.g. Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006). The ages of the participants varied from 18 to 43, with a mean of 21.8 ($SD = 3.45$). Seventy-one of the participants (50 %) were females and 71 of them (50%) were males, and 119 (84 %) were undergraduate, 23 (16 %) were graduate students. The students who reported that they had never been in a romantic relationship were excluded from the sample. Among 142 participants, 83 (58.5%) reported that they were in an ongoing relationship, the duration of which ranged from 1 to 360 months ($M = 30$, $SD = 48$), and 59 (41.5%) indicated that though they were not currently in a romantic relationship, they had been in a romantic relationship which lasted for 1 to 80 months ($M = 18$, $SD = 22$).

Measures. Four measures were used in the study. *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was developed in order to assess the perceived quality of relationship and relationship satisfaction of married or cohabiting couples. It has four subscales, namely dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, affectional expression, and dyadic satisfaction. Higher scores reflect perception of better quality of relationship. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Fırsiloğlu

and Demir (2000) with sufficient psychometric properties. *Problem Solving Inventory* (PSI; Heppner & Peterson, 1982) was designed to assess people's perception of their problem solving abilities. Higher scores indicate ineffective problem solving abilities. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Şahin, Şahin, and Heppner (1993). In the current study, the instruction has been modified so that the participants were asked to respond to the items of the inventory based on the conflictual situations they faced with their romantic partners. *Conflict Tendency Scale* (CTS; Dökmen, 1986) was developed based on Harary and Battel's (1981) "Communication Conflict Theoretical Model". CTS assess individuals' communication abilities and problems they faced during communication. Higher scores indicate communication problems. *The revised version of Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory* (ECRI-R; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) was developed in order to assess adult attachment styles in close relationships. It has two subscales, namely, avoidance and anxiety subscales. Based on these two subscales the four attachment styles are grouped (i.e., low scores on both subscales indicate secure attachment, high scores from both subscales indicate fearful attachment, low scores from avoidance subscale and high from anxiety indicate preoccupied attachment, and low scores from anxiety and high from avoidance indicates avoidance attachment style). ECR was adopted into Turkish by Sümer (2005).

3. Results

Prior to the variance analysis different categories were created for the independent variables of the study. For this aim, four attachment styles were grouped under two categories as secure and insecure attachment styles. Individuals with a secure attachment style, were again categorized as those having secure attachment styles ($n = 67$, 47%), while individuals with fearful, preoccupied, and dismissed attachment styles were categorized as those having insecure attachment styles ($n = 75$, 53%). Similarly, for problem solving skills and communication skills measures 2 groups were created via median split procedure. As for the categorization of problem solving skills, in the effective problem solvers group there were 69 (49 %) participants, while in the ineffective problem solvers group there were 73 (51 %) participants. Finally for the communication skills as measured by Conflict Tendency Scale, in the high conflict tendency group there were 70 (49 %) participants, and in the low conflict tendency group there were 72 (51 %) participants. For the descriptive details of these categorizations see Table 1.

Table 1. Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD) and Ranges for the Measure of the Study

Measures	N	M		SD	
Problem Solving Inventory					
Effective Problem-Solvers	69		104.59		14.01
Ineffective Problem Solvers	73		72.60		11.49
Conflict Tendency Scale					
High Conflict Tendency Group	70		167.04		12.33
Low Conflict Tendency Group	72		135.18		13.18
Dyadic Adjustment Scale					
Dyadic Cohesion	141		17.46		3.56
Dyadic Consensus	142		47.59		8.59
Dyadic Satisfaction	142		36.45		9.67
Affectional Expression					
Attachment Style		Avoidance	Anxiety	Avoidance	Anxiety
Secure Group	67	1.98	2.77	.43	.52
Insecure Group	75	3.12	3.91	.86	.78

Subsequent to this categorization a 2 (Attachment Styles: Secure and Insecure) x 2 (Effectiveness of Problem Solving Skills: Effective and Ineffective) x 2 (Level of Conflict Tendency: High and Low) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed on different dimensions of the relationship satisfaction (i.e., subscales of Dyadic Adjustment Scale, namely dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, affectional expression, and dyadic satisfaction). Multivariate analysis revealed a significant Attachment Style main effect (Multivariate $F [4, 128] = 8.33$, $p < .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .79, $\eta^2 = .21$) and a significant interaction effect for Effectiveness of Problem Solving Skills x Level of Conflict Tendency (Multivariate $F [4, 128] = 3.95$, $p < .005$, Wilks' Lambda = .89, $\eta^2 = .11$).

Following this multivariate analysis, univariate analyses were conducted for the significant effects, with the application of Bonferroni correction. Thus, for these univariate analyses the alpha values that were smaller than

.0125 (i.e., $.05 / 4 = .0125$) were considered to be significant. Results of the univariate analysis with Bonferroni correction revealed significant Attachment Style main effect only on dyadic cohesion ($F [1, 131] = 13.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$) and dyadic satisfaction ($F [1, 131] = 24.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$) dimensions of the relationship satisfaction. These results indicated that participants with secure attachment styles reported higher levels dyadic cohesion ($M = 18.63$) and dyadic satisfaction ($M = 39.41$) as compared to insecure participants ($M_s = 16.40$ & 33.80 , respectively for cohesion and satisfaction dimensions).

Regarding the observed interaction effect, univariate analysis with Bonferroni correction revealed significant Effectiveness of Problem Solving Skills x Level of Conflict Tendency interaction only on the affectional expression dimension of the relationship satisfaction ($F [1, 131] = 7.35, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$). For this interaction effect, post-hoc analysis conducted with Bonferroni test (see Table 2) indicated that, among participants who had high tendency to engage in conflicts, those having ineffective problem solving skills reported lower levels of affectional expression as compared to those having effective problem solving skills. However, for individuals with low conflict tendencies, abilities of problem solving did not influence the level of affectional expression. Similarly, those who had ineffective problem solving skills reported lower affectional expression when they had high conflict tendencies, as compared to the condition when they had low conflict tendencies; however for those who had effective problem solving skills, the tendency to engage in conflicts did not influence their affectional expression level.

Table 1. *The mean score of Conflict Tendency and Problem Solving Skills on the Affectional Expression Dimension of the Relationship Satisfaction*

	High Conflict Tendency	Low Conflict Tendency
Ineffective Problem Solvers	9.08 _a	10.21 _b
Effective Problem Solvers	10.28 _b	9.27 _b

Note. The mean scores that do not share the same subscripts on the same raw or on the same column are significantly different from each other.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of being secure or insecure, being an effective or ineffective problem solver, and having effective or ineffective communication skills on different dimensions of relationship satisfaction. Results revealed that secure individuals reported greater relationship satisfaction and dyadic cohesion as compared to insecure individuals. Moreover, it is found that for individuals with a high conflict tendency, being effective or ineffective problem-solver effects affectional expressions; whereas for those not having such a tendency, problem-solving skills makes no difference. Furthermore, being an ineffective problem-solver effects affectional expression when the individual has a tendency to engage in conflicts as compared to individuals who does not have such a tendency. Finally, the results yielded no difference between effective and ineffective problem-solvers when the individual have a lower tendency to engage in conflict.

Current theoretical perspectives suggest that adult attachment style is an important factor associated with relationship satisfaction (Marchand, 2004). According to Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias, and Gillath (2001), when proximity maintained under stressful times and when closeness reestablished after a period of separation, secure base schemas are get activated, which consists of positive affect such as relief, warmth, and loving. In accordance, it could be assumed that when secure individuals make a general evaluation regarding their experiences within their romantic relationships, they may be ending up with greater feelings of cohesiveness. On the other hand, insecure individuals who are mainly uncomfortable with emotional closeness or are persistently worry about separation (Saavedra et al., 2010) might not be able or not willing to recognize the cohesive aspects of their relationships. On the basis of similar evaluations, secure individuals might end up with a greater relationship satisfaction appraisal than insecure individuals. In fact, previous studies yielded that having a secure attachment style rather than insecure attachment style is a critical factor associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Egeci & Gençöz, 2006; Feeney, 1999).

On the basis of problem-solving abilities, the results yielded that being an effective problem-solver resulted in higher levels of affectional expression when the individual does not have a tendency to engage in conflict. However being an effective or ineffective problem-solver did not make a difference for those who had not such a tendency. According to Mayer (2000), people carry their communication conclusions from their earlier experiences into the

current situation, which might be taken as an indicator of constructing problem-solving efficiency evaluations on the basis of prior conflict experiences. Moreover, in their study Belzer and D’Zurilla (2002) found that individuals with a poor perception regarding their problem-solving abilities tend to use maladaptive coping strategies than individuals who are more confident with their problem solving abilities. In this sense, as higher levels of conflict tendency represent experiencing misunderstandings, getting easily angry without listening and trying to insist one’s own point of views (Dökmen, 1986), for those individuals even slightest disagreements could be easily turning into a conflict. Thus, their prior evaluations regarding their problem-solving abilities might affect how they would express their feelings. On the other hand, as lower levels of conflict tendency indicates trying to understand the other and being able to stay calm, these individuals might be taking disagreements under control, and solve insignificant debates without needing to use any problem-solving skill.

Finally, the results yielded that for ineffective problem-solvers, higher levels of conflict tendency was associated with lower levels of affectional expression; whereas for effective problem-solvers affectional expression had not differed according to conflict tendency levels. As mentioned above, individuals transfer their communication results into the current situation (Mayer, 2000), and thus based on their prior experiences individuals who perceive themselves as ineffective problem solvers might be withdrawing from conflictual situations. In fact, Largo-Wight, Peterson, and Chen (2005) explained the relation between prior experiences and perceptions regarding problem solving skills with a vicious circle. That is, they have suggested that as an individual disregards or withdraws from a problem, he/she tend to perceive his/her own problem solving skills as poor and thus, those individuals may prefer to ignore or withdraw from the problems. On the other hand, being able to communicate effectively requires listening to the other and trying to understand the causes of the problem (Noller & Feeney, 1998). However, when an individual prefers to avoid a conflictual situation, the conflict would remain unresolved, and as a result affectional expressions might be hindered. Contrary to this, effective problem solvers might be engaging in more constructive approaches, and resolve disagreements with expressing their feelings openly.

In conclusion, those with high conflict tendencies (i.e., those having communication problems) and ineffective problem solving skills constituted the risk group for the experienced problems in affectional expression dimension of the relationship satisfaction. Regarding the problems experienced in dyadic cohesion and dyadic satisfaction dimensions of relationship satisfaction, those people with insecure attachment styles constituted the risk group. Thus, the study implies that in marriage and couple therapies, the therapist should either focus on improving an individual’s communication skills (such as listening to the partner in order to prevent misunderstandings) or on teaching effective problem-solving skills in order to improve couples’ affectional expressions, which might in turn improve the overall evaluation of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, in doing so, the therapist should take into account the security level of the individual in order to gain a wider understanding on the possible ineffective problem solving skills.

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